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TABOO IN MESOPOTAMIA

A REVIEW ARTICLE

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It is somewhat unusual these days for a comparative study of Mesopotamia and Israel to offer many new insights into both subjects, but K. van der Toorn has managed to do just that in his *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia*.¹ The author has brought an impressive range of cuneiform texts to bear on the biblical text, including a small group of unpublished prayers. Bearing in mind the successes of the book, this review article will focus on the author's understanding of the Sumerian term *níg-gig*.² Van der Toorn follows Hallo's equating of the term *níg-gig* / *ikkibu* with Hebrew *tō'ēbāh* "abomination" on the basis of a selection of proverbs, each ending with the phrase *níg-gig* or *níg-gig DN*, to which Hallo refers as Sumerian taboos.³ It is doubtful, however, whether "abomination" and "taboo" appropriately describe the types of behavior classified as *níg-gig* in proverbs literature. The following examples demonstrate the difficulties of such an analysis:

di-k[u₅ níg-gig-na ħul-a di níg-érim-e ki-ág níg-gig 4utu-kam

O judge, justice perverted is the verdict which favors villainy, and
is a *níg-gig* of Utu.⁴

A serious miscarriage of justice, which may not be noticeable to a third party other than the deity who can read innermost thoughts, is the only plausible example of an "abomination" against a deity. A similar court-related proverb is less severe:

1. *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* (Assen/Maastricht: van Gorcum, 1985). I have had the benefit of many valuable suggestions from T. Jacobsen and I. L. Finkel, and from my Anthropology colleagues B. Kapferer and M. Rowlands.

2. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction* p. 43.

3. JQR 76 (1985) 21ff., and especially pp. 39f. The association between Hebrew *tō'ēbāh* and the semantically related terms *ikkibu*, *asakku*, and *anzillu* is supported by standard definitions: CAD I/J 55ff. translates *ikkibu* as something "abhorrent" or "sin"; CAD A/2 gives "taboo" for *asakku* (326f.) and "abomination" for *anzillu* (153). The present discussion focuses on the Sumerian terminology, which is less well documented than its Akkadian counterparts.

4. JQR 76 (1985) 24, 39, no. 1a.

níg-zu-a-ni ga-ra-an-da-ab-bé (var. dab₅-bé)
 níg-nu-zu-àm lú-ki-inim-ma ab-ta-è
 níg-gig ^dsuen-na-kam

Let me speak about what he knows:
 he produced a witness for what he knows nothing about;
 a níg-gig of Sin.⁵

In this case, the offense may be unintentional or even guileless, and cannot represent the same degree of culpability as that one incurred by the judge who secretly perverts justice. Moreover, most of the proverbs with níg-gig speak about much more mundane matters:

šu nu luḥ-ḥa ka/kiri-e tùmu-da níg-gig-ga-àm

To put an unclean hand to the mouth/nose is a níg-gig.⁶

These proverbs, spanning the categories of ethics and etiquette, are interpreted by van der Toorn as referring to “something incompatible with the character of the gods, provoking their anger and repulsion,”⁷ which seems to be an unduly harsh assessment of such aphorisms, as in the following case:

lú ^{ma}ma-ḍiri-ga lú ^{ma}ma-ru-ru-ḡú¹
 níg-zuḥ di-dam níg-gig ^dsuen-na-ke₄

For the man sailing downstream to call out “theft” to the one sailing upstream is a níg-gig of Suen.⁸

It is difficult to tell whether this is a matter of economic rivalry or simply churlish behavior, but the injunction may not have serious ethical ramifications. The following is a similar case of bad manners:

‘šu¹ nu-luḥ-ḥa kaš ì-dé-a
 us₇ du₁₁-ga ḡiri nu-sig₁₈-a
 kiri te-en-na saḥar nu-gi₄-a

5. JQR 76 (1985) 28, 40, no. 8. CT 58 69:13'-14' has variant readings: níg-zu a-na-àm ga-ra-ad-da-bé níg-nu-zu a-na-àm lú-ki-inim-ma ab-è, “let me tell you about whatever is known; whatever is not known a witness will bring out.”

6. JQR 76 (1985) 28, 39, no. 5.

7. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction* p. 43.

8. JQR 76 (1985) 39 no. 3a = OECT 5 35 rev. 15-16, and CT 58 69:17'-18'; see R. Falkowitz, “The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections” (unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1980) p. 244. For níg-zuḥ di-dam, see similarly MSL 5 199:6 lú-sikil-dù-a di-da-kam, *ša ma-ag-ra-a-ti i-ta-mu-ú*, “one who utters slander.” Hallo’s reading káb(KA×A)-di is based upon one manuscript (JQR 76 [1985] 26 n. 24), but the evidence that káb-di corresponds to Akkadian *latāku* in this context is uncertain.

eme-ak an-bar₇ an-dùl nu-gá-gá
níg-gig ⁴utu-kam

Unwashed hands have poured out beer; spitting without stepping (on it),⁹ blowing the nose¹⁰ without removing the dirt, using the tongue (intercourse?)¹¹ at noon without having a shade: a ní-g-gig of Utu.¹²

These are all separate items which are grouped together as a ní-g-gig of Utu, each representing some aspect of impropriety which may go unnoticed except by the god, but unlikely to be considered grievous enough to be abhorrent to the deity.

Other uses of ní-g-gig in proverbial statements similarly refer to the limitations or boundaries of proper behavior, as in the following proverb¹³:

am-e ní-g-gig ^{#1}apin-na-kam

The plow is out-of-bounds to the aurochs.

The meaning of ní-g-gig here refers to the misuse of an instrument or object, representing a violation of the craftsmanship which designed it for a specific use, much as in modern terms book burning would be considered a "taboo." Such a statement appears to be more of a maxim than a statement of either ethics or etiquette.

Another delimiting use of ní-g-gig, in an Emar version of the Namzitarra myth,¹⁴ has the appearance of an adage potentially belonging to one of the proverb collections quoted above:

mu min-šu-ši-mu-meš nam-lú-u₁₈-lu ní-g-gig-bi ʕi-a
MIN šu-ši MU.MEŠ lu-ú ik-ki-¹ib a-mi¹-lu-u₄-ti ba-šu-š[a]

Twice sixty years is the limit (ní-g-gig) of mankind.

9. For the danger of spittle not being covered up, see M.-L. Thomsen, *Zauberdiagnose* p. 75, citing AOAT 1 6:69, uš₁₁ ʕul saḡar nu-dul-la || ru-u²-tú le-mut-tú šá e-pe-ri la kát-mu, "evil spittle not covered by dust."

10. This expression is parallel to Akkadian *na-pi-iš ap-pi* (CAD N/1 136b), for which compare te-en-te-en || *nuppušu*, "clean out," "make respire" (CAD N/1 288).

11. Thorkild Jacobsen, *JANES* 5 (1973) 209, translated eme-ak as "to chat," but sexual intercourse is not ruled out by the context.

12. JQR 76 (1985) 39 no. 4.

13. E. I. Gordon, *JCS* 12 (1958) 11, 53; Falkowitz *Rhetoric Collections* p. 160.

14. D. Arnaud, *Emar* 6/2 440: 74174a ii 23', and *Emar* 6/4 no. 771:23'-24'. See now J. Klein, *AcSum* 12 (1990) 58, who translates ní-g-gig in this context as the "bane" of humanity. The word "bane," however, originally implied harm from poison or general ruin, or the curse of implied harm. Most of the more specific meanings of ní-g-gig relating to "limits" and "prohibitions of sacred objects" are not intrinsic to the meanings of "bane."

There is no sense here either of abomination or taboo, but simply an indication of the limit beyond which man cannot go.

It seems clear from these other proverbs that the meaning “abomination” cannot be universally applied to *níg-gig*, especially since the term “abomination” implies something hated or rejected by the god(s), while *níg-gig* may imply just the opposite, namely something “reserved” for a god, a meaning it shares with *ikkibu*.¹⁵ A good example of the use of *níg-gig* in this latter sense appears in one proverb¹⁶:

še-muš₃ níg-gig lú-gedim-ma-ka
zì-gig níg-gig dingir-ra-na-ka

The šemuš-flour is the “reserve” (*níg-gig*) of the necromancer,
and wheat is the “reserve” (*níg-gig*) of the god.

The proverb itself reflects a statement in Sumerian unilingual and bilingual incantations¹⁷:

²še-muš₃ níg-gig gedim-ma ²gig níg-gig ṛ dingir¹-[ra-ke₄]
²še-nu-ḥa níg-gig ṛ x x¹ [. . .]
giš-nú-da-na-ke₄ ṛ ù¹-[me-ni-ḥur]

The šemuš-flour, which is out-of-bounds (*níg-gig*) for a ghost, and wheat, which is the “reserve” (*níg-gig*) of a (personal-)god, and the šenuḥa-barley . . . [use to encircle] the bed.

The circle of flour is intended to repel the ghost, to prevent him from approaching the patient’s bed; but the flour components of the magic circle are described as *níg-gig* both to the ghost and to the personal god, an unlikely contradiction if *níg-gig* is “abomination.” The alternative idea of flour “forbidden” as an offering to a ghost or a god¹⁸ correctly assumes that the particular ingredients of the magic circle are forbidden for any other purpose,¹⁹ but the same contradiction between flour “forbidden” both to ghost and god remains. These flours, however, cannot be considered to be abhorrent, since that would defeat one purpose of the magic circle, namely, to encourage the benevolent spirits to be present at the patient’s side, or by his bed. By the same logic, the Nimrud incantation that calls for

15. CAD I/J 55ff.

16. Falkowitz Rhetoric Collections p. 243 3:168-69.

17. Cf. CT 44 34:22-23, Forerunners to Uduḡ-ḫul 789-90, Iraq 27 (1965) 165:50-55.

18. CAD I/J 55b.

19. See Hallo, JQR 76 (1985) 29. One wonders whether Surpu III 127, *ma-mit ina ušurti ma-ḥar* ‘šamaš a-ra-du, “the ‘oath’ against descending into the magic circle before dawn” might be referring to the violation of the protective powers of the magic circle.

the same flour and barley, *níg-gig* to both ghost and god, to be employed to wipe down the victim,²⁰ is hardly appropriate for a substance considered to be an “abomination.” A more likely meaning for *níg-gig* in this context is “reserved” for a ghost or god,²¹ set apart for a god or sacred purpose, thereby rendering the object so described unusable for any secular purpose, and hence off-limits.

A similar meaning for *níg-gig* may occur in an unusual lexical equation²²:

[šu] šilig	= šu <i>kù-tum</i>
[šu] šilig-ga	= <i>im-nu</i>
[šu] níg-gig	= šu <i>ma-ru-uš-tum</i>
[šu] níg-gig-ga	= <i>šu-me-lu</i>

CAD²³ translates *maruštu* here as “left hand,” or “impure hand,” although such a meaning would have to be considered exceptional. It is clear that the contrast between right and left is “clean” and *maruštu*. Although šilig can correspond to *ellu* or *namru* in bilinguals,²⁴ it is more likely used here as an allomorph of *zalg* / *namru*²⁵ which accords well with the suggestion that *maruštu* derives from **maršu/aršu* (*w-r-š*), “dirty.”²⁶ Nevertheless, the idea of describing the left hand as “unclean” does not fit the general semantic picture of *níg-gig*. However, the Sumerian terminology may imply something entirely different, namely that the right hand is šilig, “powerful” or “strong,” while the left hand is “reserved” for specific unpleasant bodily functions and hence is not to be touched or used for ordinary purposes.

A proverb (or riddle?) from CT 58 69:11' may also allude to *níg-gig* as a “reserved” activity:

šu-gi₄-gi₄ níg-gig 4nin-urta-ke₄
 nu-du₁₁-ga níg-gig 4nin-urta-ke₄

20. Iraq 27 (1965) 165.

21. CAD I/J 57.

22. Antagal C 240-43 (MSL 17 201).

23. CAD M/1 291.

24. CAD E s.v.

25. See M. Civil, JAOS 103 (1983) 63, and especially pp. 46-47, where he discusses this passage in detail, relating it to the unusual motif in the myth of the Marriage of Sud, in which Nuska counsels Enlil to come bearing gifts with the left hand. The use of the left hand may have been meant ironically to accentuate the motif of Enlil mistaking Sud for a prostitute, being reminiscent of another myth in which Enlil rapes Ninlil, but Falkowitz's attempt in *La Fable*, Fondation Hardt, Entretiens 30 (Geneva, 1983) 19, to relate the latter myth with one proverb (= JQR 76 [1985] 26 no. 3) is unconvincing.

26. CAD M/1 319.

“reciprocity”—a *prerogative* of Ninurta
not to speak—a *prerogative* of Ninurta

The term *níg-gig* here seems to reflect an action, in this case either to answer the query or not, which is entirely at the god’s discretion; hence it is an act “reserved” for the deity.

In a different sense *níg-gig* is “trouble,” “distress” (/ *maruštu*), or even “disease,” and the process of semantic development can be traced from these meanings. The idea of “trouble,” “difficulty” is most clearly expressed in “Man and His God” 74-75²⁷:

su-gá á-sàg níg-ḫul-gál-e ‘a’ im-m[a-ni]-íb-tu₅
a-rá-gá níg-gig-ga-bi šu ḫul dí-ma-bi (var. du₁₁-[ga-bi])

The malevolent Asag-demon has bathed in my body,
while its evil power puts trouble in my way.

The particular meaning of “disease,” “illness” (*gig*) appears several times in the Letter of Sin-iddinam to Utu²⁸:

nam-tar ḫul-gál á-sàg níg-gig-ga nu-mu-un-na-te-ge₂₆
[. . . u] l i-te-eḫ-ḫi-šú
lú mu dingir sal-la-bi níg-gig-ga ì-gu₇-e ugnim-bi silim-ma
[. . . i-ku] l-šú-nu um-man-šú-nu šal-ma

Even the evil Namtar-demon or Asag-disease will not (dare to)
approach (the Šimaški-people),
who use what is unwholesome and blaspheme, but their army is
healthy.²⁹

Here *níg-gig* is used to indicate something “unhealthy” balancing *silim* in the second half of the line.³⁰

27. Edition by J. Klein, cited courtesy of the Sumerian Dictionary Project. Cf. M. E. Cohen, ZA 67 (1977) 10:62, ša-zu níg-gig-ga kur-še nu-e-dè, “It is your intention (Utu) that misfortune not extend to the Netherworld.” Cohen’s interpretation of *níg-gig* here as “taboo” (see p. 1) is incongruous, since the following line (63) goes on to say that man should not have anything (in the Netherworld) which causes evil (*níg-ḫul-dim-ma*), which is synonymous with trouble and disease.

28. Hallo, FsKraus 100:28-29.

29. The passage attempts to show how abhorrent are the barbaric Šimaški peoples, whom even demons do not approach and to whom hence the usual norms of civilized behavior do not apply.

30. In other passages in the Letter of Sin-iddinam Hallo has translated *níg-gig* as “plague” or “illness”: uru-zu larsa^{ki} ša-ge-pà-da-zu níg-gig-ga im-ma-an-ak, “Your city, Larsa, chosen by you, has suffered plague” (p. 98:12); *níg-gig-ga-ak-bi èn tar-bi-ib* : [. . . šì-t] a²-al-šu-ma / [uru-zu] larsa^{ki}-ma è-ni-ib : [. . .] šu-ú-ši / [. . .] níg-gig-ga ša-bi zi-ab-ta, “Ask about its

The examples cited above point to a range of meanings of *níg-gig*: (1) something causing trouble or difficulty, probably related to disease, for which the anthropological term “danger” could be used; (2) “sacred,” that is, something (such as flour offerings) set apart for cultic use; (3) a limitation; and (4) something incompatible or incongruous, an “anathema.”³¹ The label *níg-gig* in Sumerian proverbs tends to refer to private

plague, remove (it) from Larsa your city, and uproot [. . .] and plague from its midst” (p. 102:38-40); see Addendum. The question is whether *níg-gig* can actually mean “something unhealthy,” since it corresponds to Akkadian *maruštu*, “trouble,” but not to *muṣṣu*, “illness” (generally *tu-ra* or *gig*). Nevertheless, the distinction between these terms is probably only slight, since *maruštu* also serves as the fem. adj. of *maršu*, “ill,” and *maruštu* (|| *níg-gig*) frequently occurs in incantation lists of demons, following á-sàg-disease (see CAD M/1 317). See also Šurpu II 69, *ina níg-gig mar-ši šá i-ku-lu*, “because of the grievous sacrilege which he committed,” which refers to eating something unhealthy because it had already been dedicated to the temple, which fits other statements in Šurpu II 74-79. Falkowitz (Rhetoric Collections p. 156) cites Inninšagurra 249: [š]à [ḫ]ul [ni]g-gig, and 251: a-nir níg-gig-ga, as evidence for *níg-gig* as sickness, although the synonyms “sick heart” and “groaning” may point to *níg-gig* as misery rather than disease.

31. The translation “anathema” conveys the meaning of being unsuitable or unthinkable in modern parlance, but etymologically the term is unhelpful because it results in circular logic: Greek ἀνάθεμα appears in LXX as a translation for Hebrew *tō’ēbāh*, although it can also refer to anything dedicated to a deity. The related terms *azag* and *anzil*, both of which mean “(something) sacred,” are partially synonymous with *níg-gig*, without the implications of trouble or disease. The word *azag* / *asakku* often occurs as a figure of speech with *gu*₇ / *akālu*, meaning “to violate something sacred,” “to commit a sacrilege,” although here one must reject literal interpretations of “eating the *azag*” as the physical act of eating something consecrated, *pace* van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction* p. 42; cf. J. E. Wansbrough, *BSOAS* 51 (1988) 208. Similar expressions, such as *karša akālu*, “to eat in pieces” only mean “to slander” or “denounce.” Nevertheless, *azag-gu*₇ may occasionally be understood quite literally, as is clear from a Nippur court case in which a corrupt ugula-official is sentenced to death (cf. Roth, *AfO* 31 [1984] 9:12-15): *inim azag-gu⁷-a inim udu i-nun²¹ ēša siskur lugal-ka ku₅-rá-‘a*, “The charge was ‘consuming the *azag*,’ the charge was cutting off the royal offerings of sheep, ghee, and flour.” The use of the expression in concrete legal jargon indicates that the ugula had probably misappropriated or misused temple property in the same way that he interfered with royal offerings.

The synonym *an-zil* || *anzillu* shares the same idiom, combined with *gu*₇ || *akālu*, as in Curse of Agade 131-33: *la-ḫa-ma dub-lá gal é-e su₃-ga-bi lú-an-zil-gu₇-a nu-me-eš-a ‘na-ra-am-šin šá izi-ka ba-an-sig*, “Although the Lahama always stood on the great base in the temple, and violated no sacred things (lit. never ate the *anzil*), Naram-Sin tossed them into the fire.” As in the court case cited above, the implication here is that the Lahama never made unhallowed use of temple property or offerings.

The term *azag* can then be used to apply to something forbidden for ordinary use, because of its designation of sacred property. For example, the historical inscription of Šu-Sin (Civil, *JCS* 21 [1967; pub. 1969] 34f.) refers to the crime of breaking certain cultic implements: *é-níg-ga-ra i-ib-ku₄-ku₄ azag-ka [k]i-gar im-ma-ni-ib-b[é]* (coll.), “he deposits them in a storehouse, and he establishes an *off-limits area* (lit. place of the *azag*).”

The term *azag* (“taboo” in CAD A/2 326f.) is expressed as a logogram *kù-an*, translated literally in a commentary text as *kās-pa dingir* (CT 41 33:9), and accepted at face value by van

or even somewhat inconsequential actions which are offensive to a particular deity, explaining that the sanction comes from the god himself, who takes a personal interest in the particular act or finds the act personally offensive, and then presumably takes the appropriate punitive action. But these offenses must be compared with other types of sin, either cultic or ethical. We should probably envisage a hierarchy of offensive actions which merit divine retribution, reflecting different terms used in Sumerian literature: *níg-gig* → *níg-ḫul* → *nam-tag-ga*,³² in increasing degrees of the severity of the violation.

Van der Toorn makes the distinction between ethics and etiquette,³³ the latter being described as “arbitrary rules of conduct,” such as those governing the eating of forbidden foods or the performance of incorrect procedures in cultic ceremonies. Such distinctions exist, but only in the nature of the severity of the sin: venial sins are noted only by a god, but more obvious infractions may result in social ostracism, while serious crimes are punishable by law.

This distinction was clearly made in the incantation series *Šurpu*, which lists a catalogue of sins (*arnu* in Tablet II and violations of the *māmītu* in Tablet III, as separate but similar entities, with some duplication). I have previously drawn attention to the use of the *māmītu* “oath,” particularly in

der Toorn (Sin and Sanction p. 42). Nevertheless, conflicting evidence can be found in A II/6 ii 17-18 (MSL 14 291): [sa-a] an MIN = ka.ka.si.ga / = *ša* kù.an a-sak-ku. Landsberger already noted (MSL 9 146) that ka.ka.si.ga in this very passage implies a phonetic rendering of the logogram, rather than an etymology, as supported by similar texts: Ea II 274 (MSL 14 259), sa-a sa₈(AN) = *ša tel-ti*; Proto-Ea 136 (MSL 14 37): sà-a = sa₈(AN); Proto-Ea 137: a-sà = kù.an. The implication is that the writing kù.sa₈(AN) for azag is a diri-writing for sa₈-kù = azag, rather than an etymology of kù dingir, despite the fact that “god’s silver” would fit well with the notion of something sacred reserved for a god.

32. The more suitable Mesopotamian equivalent to biblical “abomination” is *níg-ḫul* || *zêru*, “to hate,” “abhor” (and *zêrûtu*, “hatred”), as in the bilingual proverb [lugal]utu-gin₇ níg-si-sá ki ba]-ág níg-érím ḫul ba-gig || *šar-ru ki-ma* ⁴[š]d-maš mi-ša-ra i-ra-am [*rag-ga i-zi-tr*], “the king, like Utu, loves justice and abhors villainy” (BWL 233:5).

The word *nam-tag-ga* (*arnu*, *šertu*) means both “sin” and “guilt” (another interesting dichotomy), reflecting the severity of this type of transgression, as in the bilingual proverbial statement [lú] dam lú-da nú-a nam-tag-ga dugud-[ām] || *ra-ḫu-ú aš-ti a-wi-lim a-ra-an-šu kab-[tum-ma]*, “as for one who has intercourse with a married woman, his sin is severe” (BWL 119:3-4). Falkenstein pointed out (Gerichtsurkunden I 130) that the term *nam-tag* was not used in Ur III court cases, perhaps because of its ethical rather than legal overtones, in contrast to *arnum* in Old Babylonian legal cases. Note that the basic meaning of this term may be “to touch” (*tag*), perhaps reflecting one psychological attitude towards something forbidden (compare Freud, Totem and Taboo pp. 27-30).

33. van der Toorn, Sin and Sanction p. 12.

Šurpu incantations, as a vehicle for conveying ethical sanctions in precisely such instances.³⁴ The theory is that *māmītu* refers to a theoretical oath ostensibly taken by an ancestor, or even seven generations of ancestors, which forbids the swearer or his progeny from committing various private acts. The violation of the *māmītu*, that is, an implicit curse, serves as the ultimate sanction, the ill-effects of a broken oath being well documented.

In a sense each *māmītu* of Šurpu is the curse (imposed by oath) on the type of private transgression described in the proverbial statements discussed above. The list of *māmītu* violations in Šurpu includes accepting a bribe to alter a verdict (III 24), making offerings with unclean hands (III 44), taking back something already offered to a god (III 22), and many unexplained prohibitions which rival in opacity the proverbs referring to boatmen travelling upstream and downstream. The second tablet of Šurpu, by way of contrast, refers generally to more serious crimes such as not releasing the captive (II 29-31), using dishonest scales (II 37, 42), removing a boundary marker (II 45), committing adultery (II 48), murder (II 49), robbery (II 61), and cultic violations (II 73-79); the list of sins in Tablet II also includes many less serious transgressions such as gossip (II 60), lying (II 38-40), and inciting family intrigues (II 20-28). The same distinction occurs in the lipšur-litanies, which list two separate categories of sin (*arnu*) and oath (*māmītu*).³⁵ The first group of sins, attested in litanies of type I I³⁶ consists of serious crimes such as murder (line 83), adultery or intercourse with a priestess (line 84), contact with an accursed man or sinner (lines 86-88), or swearing falsely (lines 91-95). The second series of transgressions, found in litanies of type II I,³⁷ is against the *māmītu*. These crimes are less serious than the *arnu* sins, and resemble the types of behavior described as *ikkibu* in Akkadian literary texts of the first millennium.³⁸ They include accidentally touching an accursed man while crossing the street (line 41'), stepping in dirty bathwater, on nail-parings or armpit hair-cuttings (lines 43'-44'), or touching an object associated with black magic or leprosy (line 46'), as well as breaking promises, and saying improper things which ought not to be said (lines 53'-54').

The double nature of *māmītu* as both "oath" and "punishment for violation of an oath," and the idea of "contagion" from contract with an

34. JSS 25 (1980) 181-92.

35. E. Reiner, JNES 15 (1956) 129f.

36. JNES 15 (1956) 136-37.

37. JNES 15 (1956) 142-43.

38. Discussed by Hallo in JQR 76 (1985) 30-31.

“accursed man” (*tamû* in Šurpu II 98-103, 128-38) is surprisingly consistent with Freud’s description of taboo:

The punishment for the violation of a taboo was no doubt originally left to an internal, automatic agency: the violated taboo itself took vengeance. When, at a later stage, ideas of gods and spirits arose, with whom taboo became associated, the penalty was expected to follow automatically from the divine power. In other cases, probably as a result of a further evolution of the concept, society itself took over the punishment of offenders, whose conduct had brought their fellows into danger. Thus the earliest human penal systems may be traced back to taboo.³⁹

In the first millennium B.C., therefore, the distinctions between venial and serious sins developed along the lines of modern theories of “taboo,” which attempt to define “taboo” as sanctions developed by society to govern anti-social behavior not already proscribed by cultic or civil laws. Furthermore, the term taboo has often been used in analysis of Levitical laws of purity, particularly in regard to the Hebrew *qđš*, “holy,” “set apart,” and similarly to Latin *sacer* and Greek *ἅγιος*, all of which refer to that which is reserved for the deity and which can cause problems if misused for profane purposes.⁴⁰ The same description can be applied to the Akkadian term *ikkibu*, which characterizes the type of violations listed in the *māmītu* lists discussed above. But can *ikkibu* be rendered as “taboo”?

Franz Steiner defines taboo as referring to “the social mechanisms of obedience which have ritual significance,” as well as “specific and restrictive behavior in dangerous situations.”⁴¹ Freud’s fuller definition of taboo merits quoting in full:

The meaning of “taboo,” as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, “sacred,” “consecrated,” and on the other “uncanny,” “dangerous,” “forbidden,” “unclean.” The converse of “taboo” in Polynesian is “*noa*,” which means “common” or “generally accessible.” Thus “taboo” has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally

39. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* p. 20.

40. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966) p. 8, but Douglas’ idea (compare p. 3) is that there is an inherent contrast between dirt and order, and that this accounts for the dangerous nature of the impure, which offends against divine rule of order.

41. Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London, 1956) pp. 20f.

expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. Our collocation "holy dread" would often coincide in meaning with "taboo."⁴²

One notes some of the meanings of *ikkibu* here, but these definitions of "taboo" are actually interpretations of the word "taboo" as applied to studies of contemporary Western society. The original Hawaiian meaning of *kapu* (that is, "taboo") was considerably different, the term being essentially used to distinguish between various groups in society, since contact between members of these groups (such as "chief," "commoner," and "women") were governed by *kapu* rules and prohibitions.⁴³ Thus, according to *kapu* rules women were prohibited from dining with men or from eating certain foods, and commoners were prohibited from any contact with superior castes for fear of pollution.⁴⁴ Sharp contrasts were made between *kapu* and *noa*, approximating the "sacred" and the "profane." These specific elements of *kapu* have been altered in modern usage of the term taboo, both in sociological terminology and in common speech, since taboo is no longer considered a marker of social classes or an instrument of social control in the way it was applied in its original context.

So do the various meanings of *níg-gig* embrace the modern anthropological notion of "taboo"? The Sumerian term *níg-gig* has none of the Polynesian connotations of preventing pollution arising from the mixing of castes or sexes, or of economic sanctions, nor does *níg-gig* itself imply contagion. There is no evidence from the Sumerian proverb collections that anyone who violates a *níg-gig* is polluted and must be ostracised, nor does the *níg-gig* itself carry any inherent sanction, magical or otherwise. Another important consideration arguing against "taboo" as an appropriate term to describe *níg-gig* is the fact that there is no Sumerian antonym to *níg-gig* corresponding to Polynesian *noa* or even Hebrew *hwl*, "profane."⁴⁵ This further weakens the analogy.

42. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* p. 18. Freud goes on to point out (pp. 34f.) that the violation of a taboo was made good by atonement rather than by purification. This applies remarkably well to the text of *Šurpu*, in which the recitation of the list of transgressions itself was probably intended to appease the offended deities, as was the function also of the accompanying rituals.

43. M. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor, 1981) pp. 51ff. points out that *kapu* became used as a device imposed by Hawaiian chiefs to prevent trade between natives and British seamen, and hence became an economic sanction rather than merely a concern with defilement or pollution.

44. Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice* (Chicago, 1985) pp. 90ff.

45. Hebrew *qds*, "holy," has the intrinsic meaning of separation (particularly in the form *hqdš*), indicating that which is set apart from the profane; cf. Steiner, *Taboo* pp. 82ff. and especially pp. 85f.

Nevertheless, none of the biblical and classical terminology has the advantage of the Sumerian term *níg-gig*, which is even more specific than Akkadian *ikkibu*: the *níg-gig* has two separate independent antonyms which specify both “danger” and “sacred” (that is, “reserved”), without having to posit a theoretical danger posed by the terminology or context. It also has two associated connotative homonyms, namely *gig*, “sacred” (as in *nu-gig*, “hierodule”),⁴⁶ and *gig*, “illness.”

The only satisfactory conclusion to the problem of defining *níg-gig* is to qualify any equivalent modern term with a specific range of meanings. The important thing is to recognize that *níg-gig* may indicate one acceptable boundary of behavior or custom, whether it refers to the limits of propriety, the limit of human lifespan, or the limit of use of an object. In general, however, it is unwise to use a vague cultural term from one society and apply it uncritically to a much earlier ethical or social system. After all, had Sumerian been well deciphered earlier, Sir James Frazer might well have included an entry on “*níg-gig*” in the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1905, in which event the word could have become useful anthropological jargon and entered standard European discourse.

Collation of some of van der Toorn’s copies and editions of British Museum tablets has given the following results:

BM 72012 (pl. 5; cf. p. 143 var. B):

obv. 3' (=6'): [. . .] *al-lu-ḥap-pu* [. . .]

4': [. . .] *nu-u²-ni* ^{su}IG ¹x¹ []

?' : [*me-ḥu*]-¹ú¹ *a-ri-mu tam-t*[*u₄*] (note *ri* correct on tablet).

K.2583+10409 (pl. 6) and K.9453 (pl. 7), lines cited in variants (pp. 150-52):

14: D: [*e-d*]*e-li*.

15: D: var. -*u* for -*ú*; author’s reading of D as *ina É pa-[p]a-[ḥi]* should read *ra-pa-[á]ṣ-[tim]* (courtesy W. Mayer).

23: D var. -*tál* for -*tal*.

30: E should read [*ṣa*] *ip¹-pu-ṣi-i[n-ni]* for [*I*]*i-iṣ-BU-lim-m[a]*.

32: E reads *a-lak-ta-ṣ[u]*.

39: E reads ^{du}bur.zi.sakar.

47: E var. *d[a-a-a-nu]*.

53: E reads x *ÉRIN-ka* before *ma-lik*.

58: E var. *tap-pu-¹ka¹*.

46. The *nu-gig* or hierodule is similarly set aside for cultic service; hence *qadištu*, which conveys this meaning of “sacred” (compare van der Toorn, Sin and Sanction p. 43).

Addendum

Professor R. Borger has kindly drawn my attention to his joins to the bilingual text of the Letter of Sin-iddinam to Utu (K 5947+8208+17479, to appear in his forthcoming edition of this text in the *Nachrichten der Akad. d. Wiss. Göttingen*). The late bilingual version of these lines support Hallo's translation:

nam-tar dugud á-sàg 'níg¹-gig-ga n[u-m]u-un-na-te-ge₂₆
nam-ta-ru kab-tu₄ 'a¹-sak-ku mar-š[u u]l i-še-eh-hi-šú
 'mu¹ dingir-a-ni ì-sal-la níg-g[i]g-ga-a-ni [. . .]gu₇-e ugnim-a-ni
 silim-ma
pa-ra-aš šá niš d[ingir-š]ú-nu a-kil [ik-ki-b]i šú-nu um-man-šú-nu
šal-ma

The grave Namtar-demon and Asag-disease will not approach them: despite breaking their divine oath and their act of sacrilege, their army is healthy.

Nevertheless, the equation between níg-gig and *maruštu* also appears in the bilingual version of the lines cited in n. 30 above (Hallo FsKraus 102:38-40):

níg-gig-ga ak-ké zu-b[i-íb èn u-me-ni]-íb-tar-ra
a-na ma-ru-uš-tu₄ in-[né-ep-šú . . . ši-t]a²-al-šu-ma
 erim-huš-a 'šà¹ úru-zu ús [. . . u-me-ni-i]b-ta-è
a-na-an-¹tu₄ i-na qé-r[eb a-li-ka mu-ta] šu-¹ú-ši¹
 á-sàg níg-gig šà TIN.TIR^[ki] . . . zi-ab-ta]
'a¹-sak-ku mar-šu i-¹na¹ qé-¹reb¹ b[a-bi-li . . .]

Know what has caused trouble, and ask about it,
 and at the strife in the midst of your city, remove death,
 and [uproot] *asakku*-disease [from] the midst of Babylon.